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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AFRICAN LIST OF STATISTICAL PRIORITIES

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Introduction

1. The subject of the setting and implementing of statistical priorities has been discussed at length at various meetings and a number of publications has been issued to reflect the outcome of the discussions. However, the recent food and economic crises have once more demonstrated the great dearth of statistical data for plan and project formulation, appraisal, implementation and monitoring. Implicit in the recommendations for Africa's economic recovery embodied in the Lagos Plan of Action and Final Act of Lagos was a wide range of statistical information required for monitoring performance in implementing these recommendations. These are reflected in the document on "The place of statistical information in the national information system" E/ECA/PSD.4/16. Unfortunately, the relevant data were not available in many countries and even where they were available they were either too outdated to be useful or the technical expertise for the appropriate use in the countries was lacking.

2. In this paper therefore a fresh look at African Statistical priorities, both in their setting and implementation, is being taken with a view to providing basic guidelines. Since conditions in the various member States of the region differ significantly, each country will have to adapt the guidelines to suit its own situation.

The role of National Statistical Services (NSS)

3. In order to examine the issue in-depth, it is necessary to consider what the role of a national statistical service should be. Briefly, the functions of NSS are three-fold:

(a) To provide the various arms of government with the necessary statistical data required for plan and programme preparation, appraisal, implementation and monitoring. This implies also data required by the government for policy formulation, research and administration. This function should not be interpreted narrowly to refer only to the data requirements of the Ministry of Planning. It applies also to the data needs of sectoral ministries and other government bodies including the parastatals.

(b) To supply the data requirements of other national non-governmental organisations, including the private business sector and non-governmental research institutes.

(c) To provide international organisations, inter-governmental or otherwise, with relevant statistical data for their use.

4. The functions outlined above are ranked from highest to the lowest priority. It is essentially the primary role of NSS to meet their governments' data requirements. All other functions are secondary to this task. However, the importance of the other functions should not be minimised. If the private sector's data requirements are met, there is an indirect contribution to the government, since the proper performance of the private sector has financial advantages for the government.

5. It should be stressed here that for the first two functions discussed above, national needs should determine the concepts, definitions and classifications. However, it should be noted that the usefulness of data for national purposes is generally enhanced if such data can be compared with similar data from other countries. The third function of the statistical office in providing data to international organizations implies therefore that an attempt should be made to apply internationally comparable concepts, definitions and classifications. The competing claims of national needs and international requirements need not therefore be mutually exclusive.

6. The issue of the role of African statistical offices is considered further in "The role of African statistical services in the implementation of the Lagos Plan of Action" E/ECA/PSD.4/15.

Scope of statistics

7. There is now a great diversity in the field of statistics not only in the subjects covered but also in the types of statisticians now working. The Report of the International Statistical Institute Committee on the Integration of Statistics identified fifteen principal categories of statisticians:

(a) Academic (including university, college, school);

(b) Business (including actuarial, marketing, economic, econometric);

(c) Government (including federal, state, local, municipal);

(d) Industrial (including operations researcher, quality controller, reliability worker, physical, engineering transport);

(e) Practitioner (including applied, data analyst);

(f) Research (including applied, methodological, theoretical, mathematical, probabilist);

(g) Student ;

(h) Biometric (including ecological, agricultural, forestry);

(i) Medical (including biostatistician, health, epidemiologist, pharmaceutical);

(j) Social (including demographic, political, judicial, criminal, behavioural, psychological);

(k) Administrator (including manager, policy former, planner, forecaster, auditor);

(l) Consulting;

(m) Computational (including manager, policy former, planner, forecaster, auditor);

(n) Survey (including pollster);

(o) Other (including sports, numerologist).

8. This diversity of statisticians reflects directly or indirectly the wide variety of statistics now available. This paper will however concern itself with a subset of this vast area, namely the field of official statistics. Even within this broad category, only the statistics produced by national statistical offices in the region will be considered. These include demographic and social statistics as well as statistics on prices, external transactions, public sector, international trade, distribution, industry, energy, food and agricuture, transport and communications, environment, natural resources, employment, education and health. In addition there are derived statistics such as national accounts.

9. How does a national statistical office establish priorities with respect to subject coverage? How does the office select priorities within the areas selected? How does it select priorities with respect to the sources of data for example, administrative records vis-a-vise censuses and surveys? An attempt will be made to answer some of these questions in the following paragraphs. A previous list of priorities established for small countries will also be examined before a new list of priorities is established.

Priority Setting

10. In the paper prepared for the Seminar on Setting and Implementing of Statistical Priorities (Munich Centre for Advanced Training in Applied Statistics for Developing Countries, 6-25 August, 1979), Sir Claus Moser makes it quite "clear that decisions on priorities relate to many different kinds of choices". He lists the following types of choices; infrastructure versus immediate improvements, statistical systems versus specific series, subject matter balance, new versus old, accuracy versus timeliness versus detail, stages of the statistical process, special collection versus by-products, censuses and surveys, macro versus micro data. The list is by no means exhaustive but it does illustrate the different kinds of choices about which decisions have to be made.

11. In arriving at these decisions, there are several approaches which can be used. A few are easily identifiable: Cost-benefit analysis, feasibility, cost-effectiveness. None of these is easily applicable to the African situation due to the great dearth of data, the competing claims of different users and the question of who has the responsibility for deciding statistical priorities. This responsibility has by tradition devolved on the central statistical office. What has generally occurred is that the programmes inherited from the time when expatriates were in charge of statistical offices have tended to be continued without necessarily determining whether in the circumstances of today such programmes are suitable. Only in a few countries have user-producer committees been established to determine the content of statistical programmes and the priorities which should be attached to the programme elements.

12. The problem of priority setting has become urgent now because of the present African economic crisis with its resulting shortages of resources. It has become necessary for national statistical development plans to be prepared within the over-all development plans of the country. Such plans should reflect the implicit priorities in these overall plans. The approach which ECA has been promoting in recent years is for a medium-term (5 years) statistical development plan to be drawn up setting out the objectives, problems to be drawn, strategies to be followed and the scope of

activities to be implemented. After approval of the plan, annual or biennial work programme budgets should be prepared indicating clearly the subprogrammes, the programme elements and the outputs expected to be delivered during the period, under each programme element. In addition, each programme element should have a priority attached to it, from highest to lowest. The resources such as professional work-months, travel funds required to implement the programme should also be indicated. This will enable to Government in approving the budget to decide what programme elements and outputs to retain. In the event of subsequent cuts in the budget, adjustments to the work programme should also be made. This enables the Government to realise the consequences of shortfalls in budgetary provision. ECA in the following years will be providing assistance in this area of statistical planning which it regards as one of the unmet needs of the African region.

The Old List of African Statistical Priorities

13. In a paper presented to a Seminar on the Organization of a Statistical Service, Mr. W.L. Booker, then Chief of the ECA Statistics Division discussed the "Special problems of small statistical offices" and concluded by suggesting the following order of priorities for such countries:

External trade statistics
Demographic data
Household sector statistics
Prices
Establishment statistics (industry and employment)
Agriculture (depending on responsibility for these data)
Derived statistics (national accounts and balance of payments).

Although this tentative order of priorities was established in respect of small countries, it seems to conform to the order established in most African countries until recently. The priorities were not established on the basis of the relative importance of the subjects for national development but rather of the ease or feasibility of producing useful data in the short-term in these areas. Other criteria for priority setting would have resulted in a different order of priorities.

The Current List of African Statistical Priorities

14. In a recent survey of African national statistical services, the following results were obtained from the 22 countries which completed the questionnaires:

Table 1. Rank Order of Statistical Priorities

Statistical Fields	Ranks 1	2	3	Not stated	Total
(a) External Trade	16	3	-	1	22
(b) Demographic	19	2	1	-	22
(c) Household sector	9	11	2	-	22
(d) Establishment (industry and employment)	13	7	1	1	22
(e) Derived (such as national accounts and balance of payments)	18	2	2	-	22
(f) Agriculture	12	7	1	2	22
(g) Transport	3	12	6	1	22
(h) Price	17	4	-	1	22
(i) Social	3	14	2	3	22
(j) Communications	-	13	7	2	22
(k) Education	6	11	3	2	22
(l) Environment	-	7	13	2	22
(m) Health	7	10	3	2	22

Rank 1 means highest priority while 3 means lowest priority.

15. If scaling is applied to the above ranking whereby 1 (highest priority) gets a score of 3, 2 (normal priority) gets 2 and 1 (lowest priority) gets 1, the resulting order of priorities from highest to lowest is as follows:

Rank	Field of statistics	Score
1	Demographic	62
2	Derived statistics (national accounts, balance of payments)	60
3	Prices	59
4	External trade	58
5	Establishment (industry, employment)	55
6	Agriculture	51

Rank	Field of statistics	Score
6	Household sector	51
8	Health	44
9	Education	43
10	Social	41
11	Transport	39
12	Communications	33
13	Environment	27

16. It is not very clear from the above picture which criteria were used by the countries to arrive at their priorities but there are a few surprising aspects for example, food and agriculture which is regarded as the number 1 priority by African Heads of State and Government is ranked only sixth on this list. Derived statistics (e.g. national accounts and balance of payments) which depend on other basic economic statistics for their compilation is given priority above those data.

17, A plausible explanation for this may be that the national statistical offices were giving priority to frameworks over basic statistics. The frameworks are supposed to identify data needs which in turn will determine the types of data to be collected. At the tenth Commonwealth Statisticians Conference held in Oxford, England from 31 July to 9 August, 1985, a session was devoted to the topic "Statistics for Development Frameworks versus Social and Economic Indicators and Basic Statistics". The conclusion of the meeting is summarised in the following quotation from the draft report.

> "The derivation of appropriate statistics for development was seen by the Conference as a matter of exercising choices within the statistician's market and deciding on an appropriate mixture of frameworks, indicators and basic statistics. The Conference agreed that it was rarely a question of using the framework approach as an alternative to compiling basic statistics and that a planned programme incorporating both was generally desirable.
>
> The importance of developing good basic statistics before devoting attention to the construction of frameworks was mentioned by a number of countries. The Conference was told that the compilation of national accounts enjoyed a high priority and made claims on scarce resources in some countries even when the basic data for completing the accounts were poor or non-existent. Such a situation was seen as a premature indulgence in frameworks which undervalues basic statistics".

18. The problems of environment which had been highlighted by the recent drought and the widespread desertification gets the lowest priority. Although the countries which responded to the questionnaire cannot be taken as representative of all the countries of Africa, their answers emphasise a point which has been made by most users of statistical data namely that African statistical offices generally do not produce the types of data required for planning and other purposes. There is need for the evaluation of the role of each national statistical office to revitalise their functions vis-a-vis the needs of government.

A new list of African statistical priorities

19. In examining practical sectoral measures to be taken for the accelerated attainment of the objectives of the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos, the Assembly of African Heads of State and Governemnt at its twenty-first ordinary session held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 13-20 July, 1985, identified appropriate and practical measures which had to be taken in certain priority sectors. These sectors were food and agriculture, industry, human resources, transport and communications, trade and finance, environment, energy, women and development and population and development. Although no order of priority was implied in the above listing, it was obvious from the discussions that the Heads of State and Government attached the highest priority to food and agriculture.

20. The secretariat has attempted to relate the discussions of the summit, the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos to the areas (subject-fields) requiring priority attention. The order of priority as given below may not reflect the priorities in all countries of the region but it is important to point out that a regional list of this nature will need to be adapted to suit national conditions and that in that exercise the producers and major users of statistical data should have joint responsibility for determining priorities.

21. The African list of statistical priorities in relation to subject-fields is as follows:

1. Food and agriculture
2. Population
3. Industry
4. Trasnport and communications
5. Trade (international and domestic), finance and prices
6. Energy
7. Household sector
8. Derived statistics (national accounts and balance of payments, life cycle profiles, satellite accounts etc.)
9. Health
10. Education
11. Labour force (employment, unemployment, under-employment)
12. Human resources
13. Social conditions, with emphasis on women, children, youth, the aged and the disabled)
14. Environment
15. Natural resources
16. Science and technology
17. Tourism

22. The above priority list is based solely on the importance of the subject. Priorities based on other criteria have not been considered.

Implementation

23. For the statistical office to implement its priorities effectively, it requires good management and leadership, adequate resources, an organizational structure which allows for easy implementation of work programmes and satisfactory conditions of service for all its staff.

24. The issue of preparing work programme budgets has already been addressed. In addition there should be established mechanisms for both internal and external monitoring and evaluation of the programme. For internal monitoring, the Director of the national statistical office or a unit operating directly under him should be charged with the responsibility for the continuous monitoring of the implementation of the work programme. Reasons for any departures from output delivery dates should always be given.

25. In addition to internal monitoring and evaluation, there should also be an external component of this activity. The unit to do this should be an independent unit set up by Government preferably within the Ministry of Planning or Finance. In either case, the unit should liaise closely with the Government auditors to make sure that resources have been used as programmed.

Conclusion

26. The paper has discussed briefly the criteria for priority setting, an African list of statistical priorities and the implementation of priorities. Emphasis has been placed on internal and external evaluation with links to auditing of the use of resources. It is the contention that National Statistical Services have to take the whole issue of priority setting more seriously and have to involve other producers and users of statistics in determining priorities; otherwise the gap between production and usage of statistics will expand.

27. It is also to be noted that statistical data which are not used are not worth producing. The use of statistical data for decision-making, planning and research should be re-examined before establishing and implementing priorities.